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ABSTRACT

The study described in this paper attempted to assist low achieving elementary school (grades 2-4) students in a black rural school district by providing free training to parents and by increasing the number of volunteers in the children's classrooms. Students scoring in the bottom quartile on the Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills were identified and their parents were contacted. Few parents completed the training offered to them, but those who did reported positive attitudes toward the program. Furthermore, teachers whose classroom volunteers regularly attended the training sessions developed more positive attitudes toward the use of volunteers. Most parents, however, refused to participate in the program, saying that they believed that their children did not need remediation. Evidence indicates that the school's nonobjective reporting of students' progress to parents created such beliefs. (Author/GC)

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An Attempt to Increase Parental Participation and Support in a Rural Southeastern School District

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An Attempt to Increase Parental Participation
and Support in a Rural Southeastern School District

The data for this study resulted from a federally funded project designed to assist low achieving elementary students in a rural southeastern school district by providing free training to their parents and by increasing the number of volunteers working with the students in their respective classrooms. By providing free materials and parent training, the school district expected increased parental support for remedial programs, greater parental participation in programs offered in the district and an increase in the number of parents serving as classroom volunteers. It was further expected that increased parent participation would help improve teachers' support for remedial programs and improve student performance in basic skills.

The recent data on the relationship between parental support and student achievement has not been consistent. Woodruff (1980) found no difference between parental encouragement, support, and reinforcement among bright and slow students in the area of mathematics. Hill and Lehner (1980) found that parents who received training in how to teach inquiry skills to their first grade children significantly improved the inquiry skills of the children. This supports the claims made by Sigel and Saunders (1979) that parents who are appropriately trained can influence the cognitive development of their children.

In this project the researchers made several assumptions which dealt with parent involvement in classroom activities:

(1) Parents of low achieving students would be willing to help their children improve in the basic skills (reading and mathematics).

(2) Parents of low achieving students would attend free training programs to learn the skills necessary to help their children.

(3) Parents would be willing to help their children by serving as paid volunteers in the classroom.

(4) Parents who did participate would have positive attitudes toward learning skills to help their own children.

(5) Teachers of the children would welcome the assistance of volunteers in their classrooms.

(6) Both parents and teachers would make use of free materials designed to assist in teaching basic skills to low achieving students.

Methods

Students (grades 2, 3, and 4) in two elementary schools who scored in the bottom quartile on the CTBS were identified. The two schools are located in the rural southeast and both schools have a 95%+ black student population. The total number of students identified was 338. Parents were contacted by telephone and at home by two trained interviewers. Parents willing to participate were given the opportunity to attend six training sessions designed to provide them with instructional skills in order to help their own children. Parents were also encouraged to serve as volunteers in their children's school. In addition local high school students were asked to serve as classroom volunteers and those interested were placed in the same training program as the parents.

Data Source

Students were identified for the study by their CTBS scores. The CTBS was administered by the State Department of Education and scores were on record at the school district. A total of 338 students scoring below the 25th percentile on the CTBS were identified.

Likert scales were developed to assess the pre- and post-test attitudes of parents, teachers and volunteers who participated in the study. Parents were asked to evaluate the training program and to assess their own ability to assist their children with school work in the home. Teachers were asked to evaluate how effective classroom volunteers were in improving classroom instruction. Volunteers were asked to evaluate their effectiveness in improving classroom instruction.

Prior to the start of the training, telephone and personal open-ended interviews were conducted with the parents of low-achieving students. During the study two researchers interviewed participating parents in their homes.

The researchers attempted to contact parents of these children (low CTBS scores) to get them involved in the project. A total of 178 home visits were attempted and 60 were completed. An additional 198 phone contacts were attempted and 43 were completed. Out of this parent group only 35 ever attended a training session and only 18 parents of the low achieving children completed 5 out of 6 training sessions.

The interviews consisted of a set of questions concerning the amount of time spent in various activities. The interview was also open-ended, and the parents were encouraged to react to the study and indicate their own reactions to the progress of their children. At the end of the study questionnaires were administered to participating teachers and volunteers to assess their reactions and solicit their recommendations.

A total of 112 volunteers were recruited. Out of the 112, 59 were actually trained and 51 were active volunteers. Of the 51 active volunteers 10 were parents and 41 were high school students.

The pre- and post-test data on the Likert scales were analyzed by use of dependent t-tests. The data from the interviews and questionnaires were reviewed by two researchers who identified the most common responses from the participating parents, teachers, and volunteers.

Results

There was a small number of parents completing the training program (35) and even fewer who were willing to serve as volunteers (10). Parents who attended the training sessions were very positive toward the program on both pre- and post-test measures. Scores for parents participating were so high on the pre-test there was no chance for any change in a positive directon. Interviews with parents indicated almost 70% refused to participate because they thought that their children did not need remediation. Many said that their children brought home "good" grades and performed as well as other children in the neighborhood. Most of these parents ignored or refused to believe the results obtained by their children on the CTBS. Teachers were more positive toward the project on the post-test than they were on the pre-test. Although the difference was not statistically significant there was a change in a positive direction that approached significance.

Teachers who participated and had assigned volunteers who showed up regularly (at the assigned time and for at least one hour) showed a significant increase in positive attitudes toward the use of classroom volunteers ($p < .05$). Teachers who had volunteers who showed up infrequently or irregularly showed no improvement from pre to post-test measures.

The interview data from parent volunteers indicated a high level of

enthusiasm for the project. The interview data from the student volunteers were mixed. Student volunteers who spent at least three hours a week indicated they enjoyed the experience, learned from it but the majority said they would not do it again. Student volunteers who showed up infrequently said it was a good experience but several indicated they were uncomfortable working with the children. Most student volunteers indicated it was hard work and it took too much of their time to continue in the program.

Conclusions

Overall the project data being reported indicated very little success in getting people involved in their childrens' schools. Given the number of people involved and their combined efforts to secure the assistance of parents and volunteers the project would have to be rated a failure. Out of 338 children only the parents of 35 showed an interest. The total lack of parental interest caused the researchers to go back and reread the interview profiles to see if there were common elements to help explain the lack of support for the program.

The interview data indicated that parents in this study refused to believe objective data concerning their children's performance because the schools consistently sent information home saying that the children were doing well. The unwillingness of schools to tell parents the truth about the skills children have or have not learned is a real issue here. Rural parents look to schools as a place where educated people make decisions about their child. There is a tendency to believe what the schools tell them about their children. In this study the inaccurate assessments made by the school district helped create a climate where parents refused the opportunity to help their children because the schools had said that the youngsters did not need remediation.

If remedial programs are to work in rural areas, schools are going to have to support the program and be willing to admit to parents that their children may not be learning as much as the parents believe.

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The study attempted to assist low-achieving elementary students in a rural school district by providing free training to parents and increasing the number of classroom volunteers. Students scoring in the bottom quartile of the CTBS were identified and their parents contacted. Few parents completed the training; those who did were positive toward the program. Teachers whose classroom volunteers attended regularly increased positive attitudes toward using classroom volunteers. Those with irregular volunteers showed no change. Most parents refused to participate because they believed their children did not need remediation. Non-objective reporting of students' progress to parents is implicated as an issue.

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